

Adam Francis Plummer



The story of
A Remarkable Man
And his family



Adam Francis Plummer — A Remarkable Man



he labor force at Riversdale included both enslaved African-Americans and hired white workers. One of those African-Americans was Adam Francis Plummer, who lived at Riversdale from 1829 to 1870. He was taught to read and write and kept a journal that recorded his life from the day of his marriage in 1841 until his death in 1905. His daughter, Nellie Arnold Plummer, used the journal as a basis for her book, *Out of the Depths or The Triumph of the Cross*, published in 1927 and reprinted in 1997. It chronicles the story of the Adam Francis Plummer family from slavery to freedom.

Born at George Calvert's Mount Albion, Adam Francis Plummer was taken to Riversdale when he was ten years old. Plummer appears to have enjoyed a personal relationship with George and Rosalie Calvert's second son, Charles Benedict, for Miss Plummer wrote, "They loved each other devotedly." They certainly shared their love of farming, as Plummer, like his master, "loved farming in every sense of the word," while Calvert, according to his mother, "love[d] farming, horses—in short, everything belonging to a farm." Upon his father's death, the younger Calvert assumed control of the estate. He allowed Plummer to use three or four acres and a horse or mule for plowing and hauling. Plummer sold the produce from this plot of land and kept the profits. In addition to doing general farm work, Plummer was a skilled carpenter. Miss Plummer wrote, "He could build a house, a barn, stable—anything." He also made and mended shoes.

In 1839, Plummer met Emily Saunders. She was the enslaved cook at Three Sisters plantation in Lanham and came to Riversdale to nurse a sick aunt. After a two-year courtship they were married at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, DC, on May 30, 1841, and that is the day Adam Plummer began his diary. For the next ten years, Plummer was allowed to travel from Riversdale to visit his wife at Three Sisters, eight miles away, from Saturday evening until work began on Monday morning.

The Plummer family made plans to escape to a free state or to Canada in 1845. Because it was unusual for a slave couple to have a legally recognized marriage, they were going to use their marriage license as "free papers." One of Emily's aunts evidently betrayed their plan to Sarah Ogle Hilleary, the mistress of Three Sisters, who dismissed Emily as a house servant and sent her to work in the fields. Perhaps as further punishment, Miss Hilleary put Emily and her four children up for sale in 1849. Ill and tending a newborn daughter, Emily was reprieved and her sister was sold in her stead.

Upon Miss Hilleary's death in 1851, her heirs sold Emily and three of the Plummer children to Mary Ann Tolley Thompson of Meridian Hill in Washington, DC. The other two children remained at Three Sisters. Calvert allowed Plummer to use a wagon to convey Emily's goods to Washington. On the day of the move, Plummer wrote in his journal, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me?" Although the distance was now greater, Plummer continued to visit his family at least every two weeks.

Four years later, Mrs. Thompson moved to Mount Hebron, near Ellicott Mills in Howard County, Maryland. She took Emily and the children Henry, Julia, Nicholas Saunders, and



Emily Saunders Plummer

Inventory of Emily's Cabin at Three Sisters

In preparation for the move to Meridian Hill in 1851, Adam Francis Plummer made this inventory of the contents of Emily's cabin at Three Sisters. Many of his entries reflect items far above the essentials one might expect in a slave family.

1. A pair of blue stone china dishes.
2. A pair of blue vegetable dishes.
3. A pair of blue edged dishes.
4. One gray gravy bowl, saucer made to bowl, with a ladel (sic).
5. One blue Liverpool soup tureen.
6. A pair of blue dishes, square 7 x 7 inches, with tops.
7. One flowered dish, with blue top, with names of states all around it.
8. This beautiful pair of pitchers, flowered green and red, hold a pint or more.
9. One milk white pitcher, hold half gallon.
10. Milk white teapot. Milk white sugar bowl.
11. Milk white cream mug. Milk white cups and saucers, one-half dozen each.
12. One pitcher, bright blue flowers on it, hold one-half gal.
13. One blue flowered teapot. One blue flowered sugar bowl.
14. One blue flowered cream mug. Blue flowered cups and saucers, one half-dozen each.
15. Two flowered gilted pitchers.
16. Two light blue pickle dishes.
17. Six white cups and saucers with handles.
18. One dozen soup plates. One large blue platter.
19. One dozen light blue, large dinner plates.
20. One dozen teaspoons.
21. Eighteen every-day plates.
22. Six knives and forks.
23. Six wine glasses. Twelve tumblers.
24. One dozen goblets.
25. Two common blue soup tureens.
26. Four salt cellars. Twelve crockware Liverpool plates.
27. One clock. One watch. One coffee mill.
28. One lard jar. One washstand. One wash basin. One pitcher. Two nutmeg graters.
29. Wooden ware—six chairs, three tubs, three buckets.
30. Two trundle bedsteads. Two bedsteads.
31. Four flat irons. One tea kettle. Two pots and pot-hooks.
32. One stove. One waffle iron.
33. One looking glass. Four pictures in frames.
34. Four glass lamps. Two tables.
35. Two 2-gallon lard pots.
36. Two feather beds. Two straw beds.
37. Three chest or trunks, and other things.



infant Margaret with her. Plummer wrote to his wife, "I am myself very much downhearted to see the children scattered abroad, and you and me far apart, to see the little children shed tears for the loss of their father."

Now to see his wife, the ever-faithful Plummer traveled by train with a pass from his master. He evidently made the trip several times. Once upon his departure he wrote, "I saw you shed tears at the cars [train] for the last sight of your husband. I looked out the car window and saw you as long as I could, very loath to part from you, but this is the way we must go!"

Sarah Miranda, the Plummers' oldest daughter, was taken from Washington to Levi Hurdle's slave pen in Alexandria, Virginia, and sold to a master in New Orleans in 1860. She wrote to her family after the sale, "I am writing with much grief. My heart is full of sorrow, and I can do no better. I hope you will not grieve after me, but in the good Providence of God, I hope we will meet to part no more."



Sarah Miranda Plummer-Howard-Clark

In 1863, word of the Emancipation Proclamation spread among the slave community. Many saw this as their opportunity to gain freedom, and Emily Plummer, along with the children still living with her, fled to Baltimore. However, they were jailed as runaways because the proclamation freed only those slaves in areas of rebellion against the Union. When their master could not afford the fees for their release, the judge ordered them discharged from custody and Adam Plummer took them to Riversdale. Once Maryland's slaves were emancipated by the new state constitution of 1864, the family was finally free. Adam Plummer remained at Riversdale as a paid foreman.

After the Civil War, the family's eldest son, Henry Vinton, was sent to New Orleans to bring Sarah Miranda home.


With her homecoming, the whole family was together. Nellie Arnold Plummer describes her return and the birth of St. Paul Baptist Church, which survives today in Capitol Heights and Fort Washington.



Chaplain Henry Vinton Plummer

"Now the object of his prayers and struggles was standing before his very eyes! Never to be again separated against their will! We never saw our father shed tears of joy except on two occasions. This was the first time!...His joy was too great for utterance!... October 19, 1866! O that never to be forgotten day! The little Baptist Church that was born that Friday night was the Gift of the Holy Spirit poured into the hearts of those four grown people: father, mother, Miranda, and Henry Plummer. Their courage never failed, nor did their zeal and ardor wane, out of deep and abiding Gratitude to God for having united the entire family."

While continuing to live in the Riversdale cabin, Plummer bought ten acres of land which he named Mount Rose, in present-day Edmonston. He began building a four-room log house, and the family moved there in 1870. They later built a larger house on the property. Sons Henry Vinton, Nicholas

Saunders, and Robert Francis also built homes there. Emily Plummer died at Mount Rose in 1876, and Adam Francis Plummer died in 1905. 



Patriarch Adam Francis Plummer surrounded by his family outside his home, Mount Rose. Standing left to right, Robert Francis, Nellie Arnold, Margaret Jane, Nicholas Saunders. Sitting, Sarah Miranda, Adam Francis, Henry Vinton, Margaret's daughter, Nellie.

As a direct descendant of Adam Francis and Emily Saunders Plummer, I am honored to represent the Plummer family and all those who labored here at Riversdale. We are fortunate to have accounts of life here at Riversdale, especially the story of Adam Francis Plummer. His story not only tells us about the plantation itself, but it also offers an inspiring account of one who unswervingly demonstrated faith, love, courage, steadfastness, loyalty, and devotion to family throughout his life. It is my prayer that those who visit Riversdale and its dependency will connect the past to the present, and find their own connections to this rich heritage.

— The Reverend L. Jerome Fowler

Great-Great Grandson of Adam and Emily Plummer

March 2001, St. Paul Baptist Church, Inc.

A Postscript on the Adam Plummer Diary

For many years, the diary was thought to be lost. However, through a happy combination of circumstances, Lucille Betty Tompkins-Davis let Jerome Fowler know that she had the diary—Nellie Arnold

Plummer had entrusted it to Edward Arnold, a cousin on her mother's side, before she died. Ms. Tompkins-Davis, in

consultation with the Plummer family, deeded the diary to the Anacostia Community Museum, the Smithsonian Institution's museum of African American history and culture. It has been conserved, transcribed, and digitized, and may be viewed on-line at http://anacostia.si.edu/Plummer/Plummer_Home.htm.



An excerpt from Plummer's diary.

Emily and Adam Francis Plummer's Children

Sarah Miranda

Church founder, wife, and mother

Henry Vinton

Baptist pastor and First African-American Army chaplain

Elias Cupid Quincy

Schoolteacher and Methodist pastor

Julia Ann Caroline Maria

Seamstress, nurse, and wife

Nicholas Saunders

Coachman and farmer

Marjory Ellen Rose

Died in infancy

Margaret Jane

Housekeeper for her father, wife, and mother

Nellie Arnold

Author and schoolteacher

Robert Francis

Pharmacist and businessman



Riverdale

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